

Defendant's Character Letters

Dear Judge Werlein, Jr,

My name is Connie Hunt, and I am the mother of Derrick Alexander Barnum. I am writing with a heavy heart but also with hope, to offer a character reference for my son as you consider his case.

Derrick is 25 years old and has always been a respectful, hardworking, and compassionate young man. From a young age, he showed a strong sense of responsibility and kindness — not only toward family and friends, but also toward animals and strangers alike. He is the kind of person who says “yes ma’am” and “no sir” without thinking twice, wakes up early to get to work on time, and stays late if needed without complaint. At home, he regularly helps me and his grandmother with chores and errands, and he’s always been someone we could count on. He also adores and has strong, protective bond with his siblings.

The charge he is facing is serious, and I do not attempt to minimize the nature of it. However, I know my son is not beyond redemption. Since his detention, Derrick has taken real steps toward change. He has started attending church-based programs to find spiritual support and guidance, and he has been actively trying to get into a rehabilitation program so he can better understand and address the issues that led him to this point. He is not running from accountability — he is taking it seriously and wants to do the work to become a better man.

I know Derrick’s heart. I believe this experience has already made a deep impact on him, and that with the right support, including therapy and rehabilitation, he can grow and contribute positively to society. I respectfully ask that you consider leniency in his sentencing — specifically an opportunity for probation combined with ongoing therapy or treatment. I believe that, given the chance, he will take full advantage of it and continue down the path of personal reform.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and for your consideration.

Sincerely

Connie Hunt

Honorable Judge Werlein, Jr,

My name is Lesa Barnum, and I am writing to share a character reference for my younger brother, Derrick Barnum. This is one of the most painful letters I have ever had to write—not because I don't know who my brother is, but because this moment requires me to hold two deeply conflicting truths at once. I believe that some actions, if proven true, are devastating, inexcusable, and must be met with justice. I also believe that my brother is more than the charges before him, and that his story is full of humanity, heartbreak, and trauma that shaped him long before this moment.

Derrick is the youngest of three siblings. I'm the oldest, and our mom raised us on her own while working multiple jobs to provide for us. We grew up in a two-bedroom house, all three of us sharing one room. We didn't have a lot, but we had love and from a young age, I helped take care of Derrick like he was my own child. He was sensitive, soft-spoken, and gentle. Even when he got teased and bullied, he never fought back; it was usually my sister and I stepping in to protect him. My friends called him "sweet Derrick" for a reason. He was never disrespectful, never violent, just... tender.

We didn't grow up with active fathers in our lives, and Derrick especially yearned for one. His father was inconsistent, physically & mentally abused our mother and I saw the heartbreak that caused him. There was a period of summers he would go stay at his dad's for a few weeks until one before he was to go to high school and was told, "he couldn't come that summer because they were taking a family cruise with his new family." Still, Derrick kept that sweetness in him. He loved our mother deeply, looked up to me like a second mom, and always carried an emotional softness that never hardened, even as he got older.

Years later, Derrick confided that he had been harmed in our neighborhood as a child—by another male, but he never shared details. He couldn't say who or when. All I know is that whatever happened left an invisible wound, and I wish more than anything that he had spoken up sooner, or that I had seen signs. That grief is something I carry every day since finding out. Especially since I have two children of my own now.

The hardest part is trying to reconcile that pain with what has brought us to this moment. If Derrick is guilty, then he must be held accountable. There is no question in my heart about the seriousness of what has been alleged. But there's also no question about the kind of soul I've known him to be for 25 years. I believe trauma can distort even the softest spirits. I believe untreated wounds can manifest in terrible ways. And I believe that, while accountability is essential, so is understanding the full person behind the moment.

Just two weeks before Derrick was arrested, I gave birth to my daughter, Camden. One evening, shortly after I came home, he made fresh lemonade and invited me to sit on the porch with him. "Let's have a glass of sunshine," he said. We sat there together, talking about how our children—his daughter and my son and daughter—would grow up not just as cousins, but as best friends. We talked about giving them the kind of softness and opportunities we didn't have growing up. That was the last peaceful moment we shared. I hold onto it tightly, because in that moment, he was still the Derrick I've always known: gentle, hopeful, full of love for his family and dreams for a better future.

Thank you for taking the time to read my words. I know your role carries great weight, and I don't write this to ask for leniency, but for consideration. I hope that when you look at Derrick, you also see the boy who loved his sisters, who yearned for a father, who carried pain in silence, and who—at least to me—was always "Sweet Derrick."

With respect and sincerity,

Lesa Barnum